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"You Must Learn to Age": Reflections on and Adaptations to Age-Related Changes Among Older Artists and Craftspeople

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Abstract
Studies about older people's participation in artistic activities have increased. However, a deeper understanding of older artists' adaptation to the ageing process is still lacking. The purposes of this study were to explore how older artists and craftspeople perceive age-related changes, and to examine their adaptations to these changes. We carried out in-depth, open-ended individual interviews with 30 visual artists and craftspeople aged 60 and older. We found that almost all of them experienced age-related changes in relation to their artistic engagement, which they mainly associated with health-related issues, namely sensory losses and physical changes. In addition, we identified six strategies aimed at adjusting to age-related changes: adapting the work pace, modifying the artistic practice, using technical aids, engaging in artistic collaboration, developing environmental adaptations, and implementing self-care practices. Most participants discussed at least one strategy to adapt to age-related changes, and it was common to combine various strategies. Findings were discussed from a lifespan perspective. Our study expands previous research on experiences of artistic participation among older people, and specifically on their modes of adapting to the ageing process in the context of their artistic practices.

Keywords Artistic participation · Lifespan · Adaptation · Older artists · SOC model

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Introduction

Several studies on the cultural and artistic engagement of older people have been carried out in recent decades (Chacur et al., 2022). Older people's artistic engagement is relevant for a variety of reasons, including the accomplishment of new gains and skills in later life. In this context, creative artwork may play a prominent role in contributions to a person's sense of identity, probably due to the possibility of self-expression and the opportunity to leave a legacy of a tangible, lasting piece for the world (Reynolds, 2003). Hence, it would be relevant to explore how older artists, who might define their identity from their artistic practices, can preserve that identity through the continuity of such practices, despite the changes that occur throughout life, especially in older age.

While there has been research on older people's artistic practices (e.g. Carr et al., 2009; Fisher & Specht, 1999; Fraser et al., 2015), few studies attempt to explain how these artistic practices are developed and sustained across adult life. There is a lack of studies on artists' lived experiences and on how they adapt their creative practices while they face a range of challenges across lifespan. Lifespan developmental theories can be valuable contributions to explore this topic, since they can provide us with information on how humans seek to pursue goals even when this quest becomes challenging (e.g. due to loss and limitations that may occur in later life), and on the ways in which they readjust their goals to attain what is feasible (Boerner, 2005). In the present study, the Selection, Optimisation and Compensation (SOC) model (Baltes & Baltes, 1990) is incorporated. Adopting a life course or lifespan view broadens our understanding of older people's artistic participation (see Chacur et al., 2022). It also contributes to scholars' examinations of age-related changes in artistic life, including shifts in attitudes, motivations and evolving needs over time (Chacur et al., 2022) – as well as coping strategies related to health problems (e.g. Gembris & Heye, 2014).

Literature Review

The SOC Model: A Way to Understand Adaptations to Age-Related Changes

The Selection, Optimisation and Compensation (SOC) model (Baltes & Baltes, 1990) is perhaps one of the most influential theories on age-related changes. It enhances understanding of individual strategies to adjust to age-related changes so as to achieve goals and develop full potential across the life course, including in later life. The SOC model (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Baltes & Carstensen, 1996) can be valuable to identify processes that individuals use to achieve their goals, including situations of limitations in resources at social, psychological or biological levels. It emphasises the processes that people develop to maximise gains and minimise losses regarding everyday demands (Baltes & Carstensen, 1996). Within this model, the SOC life-management strategies (Freund & Baltes, 2000, 2002) include three components (processes), namely selection, optimisation and compensation. These are dynamic elements that are interrelated.

Firstly, *selection* focuses on the process of goal selection. Elective selection refers to committing to goals focused on achieving higher levels of functioning. In contrast, loss-based selection involves modifying goals or the goal system due to losses in previously existing goal-relevant resources. Secondly, *optimisation* is linked to behaviours aimed at achieving goals, focusing specifically on efficiently applying and coordinating resources to maximise abilities. Finally, *compensation* aims to counterbalance or prevent losses, without necessarily looking for the achievement of higher levels of functioning. Compensation can be achieved through the acquisition of internal substitutes (e.g. learning the Braille system) or through external aids (e.g. using a wheelchair). If compensatory efforts fail, the individual may consider adjusting their goal hierarchy as an alternative.

The SOC model provides a comprehensive framework for adaptive lifespan development (Baltes & Carstensen, 1996) from the outset (e.g., Baltes & Baltes, 1990), offering a broad representation of the dynamics between developmental gains and losses across different periods of lifespan (including later life) and within various domains of functioning (Riediger et al., 2006).We argue that the SOC model can shed some light on the ways in which older people maintain personally meaningful goals throughout their life, by adjusting to age-related changes so that they can continue to perform valuable activities that give them a sense of self, such as artistic practices.

Adaptations to Age-Related Changes among Older Artists: An Underexplored Field

Research on older people's artistic participation has grown in recent decades. However, it focuses mainly on the benefits of artistic activities and health improvement, and places little emphasis on lifespan elements concerning these practices (Chacur et al., 2022).

Some research considers a lifespan perspective on artistic practice and ageing. For instance, in their model of Creative Ageing, Tromp and Glăveanu (2023) proposed that attitudes toward artistic participation and ageing were robust predictors of whether older individuals will engage in creative practices. They showed that older people with skills in a creative hobby were more likely to continue participating in those activities. In addition, Tromp and Sternberg (2022) suggested that constraints could either increase or decrease creativity; for instance, changes in physical abilities can make creativity less likely. The study by Reed (2005) suggested that older artists recognise a strength or stability in their creativity with age, largely attributed to the benefits of their experience. Most of the participants showed flexibility and a sense of increased integration, demonstrated by the self-acceptance of their own work. In this context, a study conducted by Gallistl (2018) revealed that creativity in later life was valuable for sustaining productivity across the lifespan and for keeping ageing at a distance; additionally, the participants strived to maintain their artistic practices. The study by Bal and colleagues (2019) explored the continuity of creative practices in later life. It was developed particularly among artists who are ageing in place, with a special focus on entanglement with their physical environment. However, previous research has paid little attention to the lived experiences of older artists especially in relation to how they understand their artistic practices across the life course, and

the ways in which they adjust to the potential losses, changes and challenges that the ageing process involves.

It could be helpful to consider a lifespan perspective of artistic activities, since artists tend to continue their artistic work as long as possible throughout their lives. Compared with other jobs and professions, artists 'do not retire'. They organise their lives in ways that help them to maintain the continuity of their artistic career as they age (Jeffri, 2011). Artistic practice is often depicted by artists as a 'strong need', as well as a meaningful support of their sense of self. Likewise, artworks become testimonies of the uniqueness of artists, by expressing their own 'voice' (Reynolds et al., 2011). Besides, artists and craftspeople may present a wide range of artistic paths. Nevertheless, little is known about the strategies they develop to sustain their artistic practices across the life course, especially the modes in which they negotiate with the age-related changes that ageing entails. A more systematic examination of the experiences of artists who need to adapt to the new realities of ageing and later life is still necessary (Swinnen, 2019).

Some existing studies shed light on this topic and are relevant to better contextualise our study. Manturzewska (1990) conducted a study of professional musicians, who informed that from the age of 40 musicians could experience physical or psychic fatigue, and a decrease in the ability to learn new pieces may occur. As a result, many musicians made a transition to music education, as a way to continue their musical career. Similarly, Gembris and Heye (2014) found that many musicians actively applied strategies to maintain their musical activity, especially after the age of 40, a time when most participants of this study perceived an age-related decline in their musical performance. Musicians offset the difficulties they perceived to be caused by ageing (e.g. a reduction in fine motor skills, speed and precision; failing hearing; difficulties with concentration and memory) by practicing continuously, taking care of their health, and being more selective about what musical pieces to play. Barton (2004) explored the effects of ageing on an older jazz musician and found that vision loss not only influenced his ability to sightread new sheet music, but also changed other domains such as transport to the place of performance. For such practical issues, the musician asked people for support as a new way to organise his musical routines.

A study conducted by Jeffri (2011) on older performing artists, addressed important questions that could shed some light on our present study, such as how their physical and/or mental health challenges limited their work perfomance, and whether these health issues influenced the content and direction of their artwork. However, the study did not include a life course perspective to understand the changes in practices among older performing artists. In another study on how professional poets understand their creativity as they age, one of the participants was confronted with memory loss issues which made him heavily reliant on his wife and the support of colleagues. Nevertheless, cognitive decline did not prevent him from writing, publishing poetry and establishing a literary prize to encourage younger poets (Swinnen, 2018).

Although our study focuses on visual artists and craftspeople, it is worthwhile to mention older artists from different fields for the following reasons. Studies on older people's artistic participation are mainly focused on music practices, while other artistic disciplines are underrepresented (Chacur et al., 2022). This may lead to the omission of specific aspects and the underestimation of a range of artistic

disciplines in terms, for instance, of elements that facilitate or hinder the continuity of artistic practices in later life. In addition, despite the fact that previous literature has promoted the incorporation of lifespan elements, a limited understanding of artistic careers still persists. In that context, Adams-Price and Morse (2024) argued that Western definitions of creativity often associate creativity (including that in the context of artistic practices) with the creation of novel products or ideas. Similarly, various approaches to the study of creativity have reinforced ageist notions that older adults are not particularly creative or that their artistic practices are merely recreational and/or intended to fill their free time (Adams-Price & Morse, 2024), without delving into their deeper meanings.

So, specifically addressing the topic of visual arts, Lindauer and colleagues (1997) analysed how ageing affects creativity among visual artists. In their study, creativity was depicted in terms of the quality and quantity of work, originality and style. The participants reported age-related changes, namely sensory losses and physical effects (e.g. reduced strength and energy), and a variety of strategies that were widely applied. These strategies included support by technical aids, shorter periods of work time, and changes in the space in which the artistic practice took place. In addition, they stated that knowledge and skills increased across the ageing process. Some artists experienced greater reflectiveness and calmness in later life. Similarly, Bal and colleagues (2019) showed that artists implement numerous adaptations to changes, including to age-related changes, to be able to keep their artistic career as autonomous as possible. They confirmed findings by Lindauer and colleagues (1997) that physical age-related changes led older artists to make modifications, such as the incorporation of technological devices, modifications in the length of pieces, or a reduction in working hours. The main focus of previous studies was not to understand how artists adjust to the changes that ageing entails. Instead, they addressed this issue tangentially, within other explored themes. Lindauer and colleagues (1997) were mainly interested in examining changes in creativity in later life, where creativity was considered a constant process of growth (Swinnen, 2019). The consideration of a developmental theory, namely the SOC model (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Baltes & Carstensen, 1996), could enhance research on older adults' artistic participation, and offer a new understanding of the avenues that artists explore to sustain their artistic practices as they age. Accordingly, the two guiding research questions of this paper are as follows. (1) What age-related changes are perceived by older artists and craftspeople in relation to their artistic practices? (2) How do older artists and craftspeople adjust to age-related changes to maintain their artistic practices?

Materials and Methods

Participants

For this study, participants had to meet three main criteria: (a) they were aged 60 or over, (b) they carried out an artistic activity and (c) the artistic activity was defined as significant by the participant. Artistic activity was understood as active, voluntary artistic practice, whether professional or non-professional.

Thirty participants (16 women and 14 men) living in Catalonia (Spain), with a mean age of 68.63 (SD = 5.3; range = 60–79) participated in this study. All participants were actively engaged in a visual arts or crafts practice, in a range of disciplines such as sculpture, painting, drawing, embroidery, jewellery, engraving, photography, textile art, enamelling, basketry, ceramics, woodcraft, collage, recycled art and illustration. All these visual arts and crafts disciplines have in common that they lead to tangible pieces regardless of the practitioners' level of expertise (Reynolds & Lim, 2007). More information about the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample is given in the table below (see Table 1).

The sampling technique was intentionally kept broad, because the study's purpose was to delve into the participants' perceptions and the meanings of their artistic activities. This study did not include activities in an intervention setting, training courses or therapeutic programmes, as these formats could affect the condition of significant and voluntary activities.

Procedure

The sample was recruited by applying two strategies. The first strategy consisted of formal communication (by e-mail) with numerous arts and crafts associations and institutions in Catalonia. A brief written outline of the study was shared, and the associations or institutions were asked to collaborate by distributing the outline to their members. Three institutions decided to collaborate. Institutions' managers distributed the written outline of the study and invited those interested to contact

Table 1 Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample (in frequencies and percentages) ($N = 30$)

Sociodemographic characteristic	Participants	
	n	(%)
Expertise level		
Professional	20	(66.7)
Non-professional	10	(33.3)
Marital status		
Married	20	(66.7)
Divorced	7	(23.3)
Widowed	2	(6.7)
Single	1	(3.3)
Educational level		
Primary studies	2	(6.7)
Secondary studies	16	(53.3)
University studies	12	(40)
Self-rated health (compared with one year ago)		
Much worse	0	(0)
Worse	6	(20) (70)
Same	21	(3.3)
Better	1	(6.7)
Much better	2	
Living arrangement		
Living alone	7	(23.3)
Living with partner	20	(66.7)
Living with partner and children	2	(6.7)
Living with other relatives	1	(3.3)

Author 1 by e-mail or phone. Twelve participants were recruited this way. The second strategy involved informal contact with artists and craftspeople living in Catalonia through the researchers' networks or through new contacts provided by the participants themselves (the snowball effect). In the latter case, the participant who suggested the contact briefly described the research project to the potential participant. If this person was interested, their contact information was requested so that they could be telephoned by Author 1. Eighteen participants were recruited through the second strategy.

Author 1 tested the interview by conducting it with a person who met all the inclusion criteria. This interview was audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and reviewed by the authors to establish whether it met the purposes of the study. No modifications to the interview script were needed. However, this pilot interview was not included in the final sample, as the interviewee lived in a foreign country, while this study was developed in Catalonia. According to the participants' personal preferences, twenty-nine interviews were conducted face-to-face and one via video call. Participants chose the place for the interview, which was most often the artist's residence or studio, a park or a coffeeshop. Author 1 who had previous experience in qualitative research conducted all the interviews between February and April 2021.

Participants signed a written formal consent form that contained exhaustive information on the purposes of the study, data collection techniques, information on confidentiality and anonymity, and the right to decline to answer any of the questions and to withdraw the study at any moment. Concerning the video call interview, the image was not recorded, the information document was sent by e-mail and informed consent was given verbally and audio recorded. All participants agreed to take part in the study. We pseudonymised data prior to the analysis to maintain the participants' anonymity, and pseudonyms have been used for the quotes in this paper. These quotes were previously translated from Spanish to English.

Data Analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews lasted between 46 and 170 min and were analysed by a qualitative descriptive analysis with the support of Atlas.ti software. We followed the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006; also see Braun & Clarke, 2021, Braun et al., 2018) for a Reflexive Thematic Analysis of the interview transcriptions. These guidelines propose an inductive process that enables data coding without incorporating it into a pre-existing coding framework. This process consists of six phases of analysis (see Table 2). In this approach, a theme reflects a pattern of shared meaning organised around a core concept or idea. Thus, themes capture the essence of meaning and integrate data that might initially seem unrelated (Braun et al., 2018). In Reflexive Thematic Analysis, themes are conceptualized as meaning-based patterns, manifesting "in explicit (semantic) or conceptual (latent) ways, and as the output of coding – themes result from considerable analytic work on the part of the researcher to explore and develop an understanding of patterned meaning across the dataset" (Braun et al., 2018, p. 47). The iterative process of analysis led to the generation of two main themes. The first

Table 2 Phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021)

Phase	Description
Phase 1	To get acquainted with the data by reading and re-reading them, and to point preliminary ideas.
Phase 2	To produce preliminary codes from the data.
Phase 3	To organise the codes into potential themes and to gather all relevant data to each potential theme.
Phase 4	To examine all the themes by reviewing their link to the coded extracts and to the full data set.
Phase 5	To define plainly and to name the themes, by analysing them to clarify the details of each one, and the complete narration that the analysis conveys.
Phase 6	To review all the themes, by choosing and analysing examples and linking the analysis to the research purposes and the literature on the topic.

has two subthemes, and the second includes six subthemes, which we will describe in the section of Findings.

Interviews

Authors 1, 2 and 3 designed a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions specifically for this study. The interviews were carried out individually to capture specific life experiences and meaning-making processes linked to the artistic trajectory of the interviewees. The interview was structured to allow the identification and reflection on lifespan and life course elements. These include reviewing artistic trajectories (including life transitions and turning points influencing artistic practice); exploring the meanings of artistic practices and potential changes throughout their life; examining processes involved in starting new works and potential changes over time; understanding the meanings of ageing; adapting to age-related changes as artists; discussing future expectations and projects; reviewing positive and negative experiences related to artistic practices; assessing the impact of artistic trajectories on other life domains and the community; and exploring relationships with other artists and potential changes in it. The following questions were included in the interview script. (1) How has the ageing process influenced your artistic practice? (2) What adaptations or modifications have you applied in your artistic practice due to ageing? (3) What aspects related to your artistic practice have become easier as you get older? (4) What aspects related to your artistic practice have become more difficult as you get older? Notably, participants decided what the age-related changes were, as the interviewer did not predefine these changes during the interview process. We analysed responses to these questions, and relevant content connected to this topic that was spontaneously narrated by participants at other moments of the interview.

Findings

'This is the Law of Life': Understanding Ageing

The first purpose of our study was to explore the age-related changes perceived by older artists and craftspeople, changes that in their view could have an impact in some way on their artistic practices. Most interviewees recognised that they had experienced age-related changes in their artistic engagement. These changes were mainly associated with health-related issues, including illness and chronic diseases. What follows is a brief description of the age-related changes perceived by the interviewees, which could broadly be classified as describing sensory losses and addressing physical changes.

Describing Sensory Losses

Some artists revealed that they had noticed losses at a sensory level as they aged, particularly visual and hearing limitations, that potentially influenced the way in which they performed their arts. Pedro, a 71-year-old man who was a painter and craftsman, and was also involved in the creation and direction of an operetta, explained how sensory losses had an impact on his artistic performance:

> The artistic issue isn't a matter of going jogging, skiing, or any of these… it's an issue of hearing, which you lose more and more, because… the frequencies… well there are some that you can't… you lose the higher ones and now you can't understand the bass ones, but, well… this is the law of life.

Similarly, Carolina, a 72-year-old woman, a costume designer who was mainly engaged in the creation of collages, pointed out that in her case her "vision is worse than before", and that previously she could "draw a line and such with more precision. Now, sometimes it's more difficult." However, she added that "it can always be fixed somehow".

Participants did not express anxiety or concern when they discuss the age-related changes that they experienced. In fact, their narratives show that their attitude is prone to accept such changes as something natural that happens across the life course. Furthermore, they stated that the effect of these changes is something that can be adjusted.

Addressing Physical Changes

A second type of age-related changes that older artists perceived are concerned with physical changes, including injury and illness, which lead, on many occasions, to the feeling of physical pain. Some of the participants mentioned the appearance of chronic diseases in later life. In this context, Macarena, a 67-year-old painter, revealed that she "got osteoarthritis", a condition that influenced the way she carried out her paintings. Elena, a 77-year-old sculptress and ceramist, exposed that since the

age of 70 due to a knee injury she noticed "that the years go by, that the body doesn't perform as it did before".

Other factors that they mentioned were not truly linked to loss of health, but to elements that they, in their own words, attributed to the ageing process itself. These includes a decline in strength, velocity, energy or difficulties with balance. For example, Silvia, a 77-year-old woman with wide experience as an enameller and illustrator, explained that she did not have the same level of energy as she had had when younger: "I don't [didn't] care about going to paint outdoors, or going anywhere… and now I would think about that twice… I mean, now… I don't have the desire to take an easel, a paint box, and go to the countryside". Elsa, a versatile 64-year-old woman who performed a variety of art and crafts perceived that currently she "[is] going slower, a bit, a bit slower", she also added that she had "many ideas, but I [she] execute them slower". Narratives about physical changes in terms of appearance were also present. Miguel, a 64-year-old painter, draftsman, and writer, noted:

> When you look at yourself in a mirror you say, 'God, what a change, just look at me now.' In other words, the physical transformation… I see my hands with spots, with wrinkles… I say, 'What's happening?' However, the person inside me is the same as I've been my whole life, the person who was 17, 18, 20, 30… I'm the same as always.

To a lesser extent, the interviewees pointed out illnesses that are potentially caused by artistic practice. For instance, Mario, a 64-year-old basketmaker revealed that he suffered from pain in one of his hands: "I guess it's a deformation, an occupational disease… unrecognised. OK, 'your hand hurts, put on some ointment and that's it'". Mario added that he felt age-related changes at a physical level, but not in other areas. Due to the characteristics of his craft activity, he spent many hours working while sitting down:

> You notice that your physique is not the same. And sometimes you're working and suddenly you get up and you want to lift something, and you say 'stop, stop, stop'… your brain is still at one point, but your body is no longer. Your body already, already… is more than 60 years old and you can't do that (…) but it's like an ageing of the body, but not of the mind.

'Another way of doing': Building present and future as an artist

The second purpose of our study was to examine the strategies used by older artists and craftspeople to adapt to the age-related changes presented above to preserve their artistic practices. We identified six strategies to adjust to age-related changes: adapting the work pace, modifying artistic practice, using technical aids, engaging in artistic collaboration, developing environmental adaptations, and implementing self-care practices. Almost all the participants mentioned at least one strategy for adapting to age-related changes, and it was common to apply two or more adaptive strategies, separately or simultaneously.

Adapting the Work Pace

Older artists expressed throughout their narratives that adapting the work pace was a strategy that helped them to handle age-related changes such as the ones described above. Depending on the participants' artistic discipline, or the level at which they carried out their artistic practices (professional or non-professional), modifications in the work pace were expressed in different ways. For instance, Pau, a 60-year-old craftsman working with jewellery, explained that in his field, there were periods of the year with greater demand for his work, such as between Christmas and New Year. Pau noticed some physical changes as he ages, mainly related to knee surgery. After the surgery, he tried to reduce the workload and participated in other types of activities for distraction:

> Obviously, I don't have the health or the vitality that I had when I was 40 or 30 (…) time goes by, but I still enjoy it [jewellery] in the same way… in the past, I could work until nighttime… and now I get more tired, I mean, there is a physical issue, right? (…) Sometimes, I need… for example, after the Christmas period, because we have a lot of work, when 10 January and February come, it relaxes me to be giving an interview, it makes me relaxed, it gives me peace of mind.

For other artists, the adaptation of the work pace was shown not by periods of greater or lesser workload, but by reducing the pace of the daily work. That was the case for Jorge, a 69-year-old male painter, who began to paint at the time of his retirement. Jorge revealed that he feels physical discomfort when he carried out long periods of painting. Therefore, he usually took breaks during his painting sessions. In addition, he reflected on the acceptance of ageing and how to learn to grow older:

> You have to adapt. You can't try to do… to do [the same] you did ten or twenty years ago. And this… and this sometimes… for many people is a reason for… sadness or depression. 'How awful, I don't do this anymore, I can't do that.' No, no… you know, you already know that you will not be able to do that (…) so what you must do is adapt and consider which transition you are in… that is, you must learn to age.

In a similar way, Elena stated that she usually took time off during her workday. However, her reflections differ from Jorge's. She pointed out that although she has suffered physical difficulties over the years, these were compensated for by the benefits obtained in other domains of her life. This shows us that in her view, ageing entailed losses, but also gains:

> …I have been very happy and I'm very happy and (…) I do all this work, which is a considerable physical effort, and it doesn't affect me (…) In the past, I never got tired, and now, well… at noon I'm looking for a chair (she laughs). Here I'm standing up the whole day, and then at noon I look for a chair, and then I make a phone call, I write a letter (…) But I think that it's normal, that is, I don't

> claim to have the strength that I had… not when I was young, but just 15 years ago. No, I don't have it. But I also think that I have taken great advantage of my life, I have done many things and I have done a lot. In other words, if I can't do so much now, it doesn't matter.

Linked to the latter, Elena added that she currently creates fewer artworks than in the past, but her artistic work had become more complex through "pieces [that] are more elaborated, that is… the process is also different, do you understand?" These narratives allow us to glimpse that the participants modify not only their work pace, but also aspects of their own artistic practices to preserve their artistic careers, which leads to the next theme.

Modifying Artistic Practice

Artists and craftspeople actively chose to modify their artistic discipline. Additionally, they may alter a particular artistic technique, to better adjust to the changes that come with ageing. Emilia, a 73-year-old female artist with a long-standing artistic trajectory, was used to work with enormous sculptural pieces, some of which are located in public spaces in the region. Now she had greatly diversified her artistic work, by exploring jewellery, engraving and watercolour. She addressed the issue of developing substitutes in her artistic practice:

> Sculpture, for example… is something that now I couldn't be in the house of a marble artist working with an electric hammer. Impossible! I couldn't lift the weights that I… I just floated, I 'devoured' a marble [piece] and it didn't weigh anything, and now I can't… but well, there is always a substitute. In sculpture, we have made small sculptures and small pieces of… [jewellery] And now we are doing watercolour and engraving, which we can do.

These modifications can also be expressed in a more subtle way, within one's artistic discipline, but changing aspects related to technique. Paula, a 67-year-old woman began her artistic trajectory as a painter seven years ago. Unfortunately, she had suffered significant loss in her vision, due to an eye disease that has increased over the years. Consequently, although she started out as a figurative painter, she developed an innovative abstract technique in her later years. She turned the challenge into an opportunity to further develop herself in unexpected ways:

> …this visual limitation has allowed me to figure out how to find another way of doing [painting] to present a good result, something novel (…) Because this visual limitation that I have… I don't know if I can… because, for example, I used to paint women, and trees… and coastlines, paintings that were one metre by one metre, right? But now I'm using abstract, with pouring [technique].

Age-related changes experienced by older artists not only invite them to modify their artistic practice in terms of disciplines and techniques, but also play a significant role in the specific theme of the artistic work. Elena described how a knee injury modified

her artistic practice. She was used to make drawings of the body, but the knee injury influenced the themes represented through her sculptural pieces:

> …I made 200 drawings about the body. The subject of the body is something that interested me very much (…) And I returned to it in 2015 with the knee issue. And I started by doing (…) pieces of traditional shapes, which is what I started to do, but in each of these pieces there is a kind of breakage, like a kind of a piece that compresses, a piece that is embedded.

In addition, artists and craftspeople reported carrying out changes in the formats or size of their artworks, to make them more easily manageable in later life. Jorge briefly and simply explained: "…before you could do… larger canvasses and now you make them smaller". Trinidad, a 76-year-old female painter, recalled some points in her artistic career in which she had to face great challenges, such as painting murals abroad. In her narrative, Trinidad reduced the relevance of not being able to do now what she used to do artistically. She described a whole novel creative world that she can access in later life:

> Well, I ventured to do very big things and now I see that it can't do them. This upset me… I painted murals, huge murals… in Japan, I was once in Japan painting murals, on ladders, on scaffolding (…) You need to adapt, you have to see that… I don't know… You must see what… what can't be done, can't be done, and that's it. I mean, there are so many things to do that it doesn't matter…

Closely linked to Trinidad's reflections, particularly to the matter of continuing artistic practice throughout the life course, Jaume, a 72-year-old man who worked in disciplines such as sculpture, painting and jewellery, addressed the point about never considering retiring from the art field. He noted that by adapting the size of artworks according to the health problems he suffered, his artistic practices can be perfectly maintained in later life:

> [About ageing it concerns me] being physically able to perform sculpture, sculpture is sometimes complicated… about sizes and moving cranes and moving foundries, that worries me. I'm not worried about painting, I started… painting small paintings, I've never done that before, and now I'm working on a collection of small paintings, that feeling of 'well, I'll be sitting and painting small paintings.' I don't see myself retiring!

We can appreciate how artists negotiate with their ageing process through the narratives. They search for a balance between losses experienced in later life and opportunities that occur simultaneously. Participants were flexible and open to exploring new alternatives. They even added new elements that help them to continue on their artistic path.

Using Technical Aids

Many visual artists and craftspeople revealed the use of technical aids or technological tools that facilitate the creative process. They explained how technical support helps to compensate for losses, for example, loss of visual capacity. Silvia, a 63-year-old woman and jeweller with wide experience in the field of artistic preservation, noted that she feels supported by the use of glasses, particularly for the creation of jewellery, because "formerly it was easier because I [she] could see more." In a similar way, Pau, now "work[s] with… glasses and a magnifying glass" to compensate for visual impairment so that he can undertake his craftwork with the meticulousness it requires.

Participants not only used supports at a sensory level, but also for greater physical comfort while the artistic practice was being carried out. Catalina was a 75-year-old woman with a long-term, diverse artistic trajectory including painting, photography, macrame and basketry. She had a significant back injury that causes her pain, especially when she was painting while standing up in the workshop that she attended weekly:

> I have a bad back injury, and in the workshop, well, I saw, in the classes that… many [colleagues] paint while standing up. I mean, my back hurts me a lot when I am standing up. It doesn't matter! Well, I sit in a chair, I sit under the easel [she laughs] I put my foot on a piece of wood that I made for myself like a block, to get my feet up a bit (…) and that's all, you adapt.

Older artists and craftspeople pointed out that technological advances can be used as tools that facilitate their artistic practices in later life. Music editing programs, 3D printers, digital cameras and the use of the iPad for drawing purposes were helpful and supportive technological devices in their daily artistic practice. Mario mentioned that the internet, computers, and the mobile phone help him by optimising his time, which resulted in less fatigue:

> The technology that I have incorporated, let's say, is telematics, computing, right? The computer, the way in which… I interact with my clients, or the people who are interested in my [craft] work (…) because it's so easy to ask something by e-mail. 'Hey, excuse me' or by WhatsApp 'can you take a photo while you're making the basket?'

Interactions with others, a topic introduced in Mario's words, adds a new element: creative practices among participants are not developed in an isolated context, but rather in connection with other people. This possibility of connecting with others introduces us to the theme explained below.

Engaging in Artistic Collaboration

Some older artists asked for help from other people, namely family or other artists, regarding specific aspects of their creative process. In general, this help was related

to practical issues that artists consider more difficult to carry out in later life, such as "set(ting) up the frames [for the silks]" (Bárbara, woman, 73 years old, textile artist), "moving [huge sculptural] pieces" (Elena, woman, 77 years old, sculptress and ceramist), and "helping us to put the paper into water [for engraving]" (Carla, 79 years old, illustrator and engraver). Marcel, a 71-year-old male painter, explained how he resolved the distribution of his large-size paintings to arts galleries and arts exhibitions, by combining two types of adaptations, with the help of his large car—a technical aid—and the support of other people:

> But… the formats, the only problem is transporting them (he laughs) that is the only problem. [Author: How do you do that?] With the car that you saw at the entrance, which is a large car, and sometimes I have adapted the formats to that… to the car, yes… and luckily, I can count on my secretary who… who helps me greatly to load them up and… to distribute them, and all that.

Trinidad also reflected on this issue. She experienced physical age-related changes; therefore, she regularly needed others to help her with practical aspects. She mentioned in particular the support of a young artist. Despite this, Trinidad found that her creative process had improved in later life:

> Of course, the physical aspect is punishing. I mean, I always say that I'm more creative than ever. But the energy isn't the… it doesn't allow me… I need a lot of support… to move, to relocate, not so much to work as to… well, today someone helped me to hang the canvas on the wall…

Similarly, Carla described the practical help received from a friend who was also an older artist: "I started making this enamelled glass that [my friend] fires for me in her oven." As she explained, this support generates opportunities for collaborative artistic work between older artists: "[My friend] and I collaborate together (…) We meet a lot, because I need her oven, and she needs me, and we do [artistic] things together and there is a… there is a bond that will last forever." In this way, the help that older artists received from other colleagues can also be enriching to their own creative process or artwork, as a visual and performative 61-year-old artist named Sergio indicated. He explained that he and his colleague have different perspectives that boosted their creative work: "a collaborator, much younger than me, but he's been collaborating with me for many years and we're going to create a comic."

Engaging in artistic collaboration indicates that adaptation strategies among participants go far beyond the individual level and show how artists are entangled with their human and non-human surroundings, as the next section addresses.

Adapting the Work Environment

Some participants changed their working environment to carry out their artistic practice in a more comfortable way as they age. Usually, these modifications took place in the context of the art studio. In some cases, the studio's space was reduced. In others,

artists relocated to a new studio. Silvia describes how she opted for a smaller studio, which led to a reduction in the size of her pieces:

> In my last apartment there was a huge oven, to make enamels and everything was very difficult, namely the energy consumption, but also my arms, pieces [of enamel fired in metal] weigh a lot. And I think about this [she laughs] when I moved to this apartment five years ago, I thought 'leave the huge pieces, and make small pieces' (…) besides here I had less space, so I put in a small oven.

Environmental adaptations can also imply abandoning a collective studio, due to its inaccessibility. This is a major issue that together with certain age-related changes plays against the continuity of artistic engagement. This situation is precisely what Macarena described:

> [I was] in the studio of another painter (…) I only stayed there for five months, because it exhausted me… four floors without an elevator! My knees were damaged, that is… I got osteoarthritis, well… theoretically I was prepared for a transplant of… you know, and I left it. I can't go up and down backwards like a grandma, of course, I'm old enough (…) and since then I've been going to Anna's [studio].

Macarena's story shows that she accepted and prioritised physical inconveniences over the commitment to a specific space.

Implementing Self-Care Practices

Artists and craftspeople explained that one way of acting in the face of age-related changes was the active deployment of self-care practices. Many interviewees pointed out that they have decided to take care of themselves, in particular of their health, as a way to support the continuity of their artistic engagement. This included practicing healthier lifestyles, such as eating "a diet that is more or less balanced, and then exercising well" (Catalina, woman, 75 years old, painter, photographer and basketmaker), doing activities that promote well-being, such as "walking more (…) going out, looking at the daylight, the sun (…) looking at the sea" (Miguel, man, 64 years old, painter, draftsman and writer), and striving in these self-care practices, by "take[ing] care of yourself as much as you need and even more" (Ángela, woman, 71 years old, jeweller).

Eulalia was a 63-year-old woman and painter who clarified how she consciously carried out self-care practices that positively influenced her artistic work, specifically when she planned to participate in art fairs, which were exhausting:

> I try to go to the gym two or three times a week, go swimming, walk as much as I can, but not … only for health, well, if I want to be able to work on my paintings, which are sometimes in large formats, and I want to be… and I have to go to the [arts] fairs that are very hard and… and to set up and such, well I have to be a bit well.

When reflecting on self-care practices, Tomás, a 65-year-old craftsman who worked with handicrafts in wood and recycling, highlighted the relevance of having good health status in later life, and of being aware of health issues, by staying focused on not having accidents during his craftwork. Additionally, he made comparisons with friends of the same age, who he considered to be in worse physical condition than he is:

> Well, you admire yourself and say well… I'm not so bad. I'm not so bad, you know what I mean, now, you notice your age… on a bike, well, my friends use electric bikes, and I don't, well… I enjoy it (…) maybe someday, but until today… now I'm on the bike the same as I was 30 years ago…

Discussion

This study aimed to examine how older artists and craftspeople perceive their age-related changes in later life, and to explore their adaptations to these changes. It contributes to previous studies on ageing and artistic practices (e.g. Barton, 2004) in the use of retrospective narrative data and the SOC model as a reference framework (Baltes & Baltes, 1990).

A first relevant finding is that almost all visual artists and craftspeople who were part of this study experienced age-related changes concerning their artistic engagement. These changes were linked to health-related issues, which we broadly classified as sensory losses and physical changes. Notably, no participant alluded to difficulties linked to mental health, emotional or cognitive aspects that in their opinion could potentially be related to ageing. Some narratives indicate that interviewees internalise a dualistic view that separates mind and body. This view suggests that the perception of physical ageing is not consistent with psychological or subjective ageing. In cultural contexts that privilege youth, the mind is always positioned as younger that the body. That conception implies that physical and psychological ageing (ageing of the body vs. ageing of the self) are autonomous processes, which allow individuals to maintain an 'ageless self' (Lamb, 2023) despite physical signs of decay. Adopting that view may help older people to maintain stability and youthful attributes in a cultural context that privileges youth over older age (Gullette, 2003). In this respect, both what was said and what was not said seems to be important. In a society where ageing is largely perceived to be linked to a decline in physical health, the moral dictate to age successfully is pressing. This would mean not suffering from severe illnesses and disabilities, having high functional capacity, and being actively engaged with life (see, for instance, Rowe & Kahn, 1987). Furthermore, due to our 'hypercognitive' society in which cognition and rational thinking are placed above body knowledge and affect (Post, 2000), cognitive decline would be considered as the least desired scenario. As Low and Purwaningrum (2020) pointed out, cognitive decline (particularly dementia) is almost always described as 'synonymous' with ageing, and common frames for dementia include analogies with natural disasters, epidemics or living dead. The living dead frame is associated to a Western hypercog-

nitive view of the self, which suggests that mind and body are separate entities, with the mind being the locus of identity or personhood (Low & Purwaningrum, 2020). Hence, to acknowledge cognitive difficulties publicly would be complex.

In addition, many artists made it very clear that health problems could also appear in earlier life stages life, not exclusively in later life (see, for instance, Reynolds, 2004), which confirms that ageing is not equivalent to disease and poor health. Physical vulnerabilities can occur throughout the entire life course. Artists and craftspeople were prone to accept age-related changes. This acceptance was predominant in all the narratives, an element that could be a prerequisite for selection, compensation and optimisation strategies.

Importantly, older artists identified several strategies that were developed to adjust to age-related changes, namely adapting the work pace, modifying the artistic practice, using technical aids, engaging in artistic collaboration, developing environmental adaptations, and implementing self-care practices. Most visual artists and craftspeople revealed the use of at least one strategy to adjust to age-related changes, although they frequently used various adaptative strategies. They commonly accompanied the narratives of these strategies with interesting reflections on the balance between gains and losses in later life.

Our results showed a complex system of interacting strategies aimed at adjusting to age-related changes. These strategies can be interpreted in terms of the SOC model (Baltes & Baltes, 1990).

Firstly, certain selection strategies were developed by older artists and craftspeople. Selection refers to the determination of goals or tasks to accomplish (Freund & Baltes, 1998). All participants in our study had a strong commitment to their artistic practices, regardless of the discipline. One way in which this commitment could be recognised was the use of elective selection based on the relevance given to the artistic practice and to its continuity across the lifespan. This finding is in line with previous research that reported a constant increase in the use of elective selection during ageing (Boerner & Jopp, 2007).

Secondly, artists and craftspeople made use of compensation strategies. Compensation is concerned with the loss of goal-relevant means (both anticipated and experienced) and can include internal substitutes and external resources (Freund & Baltes, 1998). Participants pointed out the deployment of compensation processes (Baltes et al., 1998) through the use of technical aids or technological tools that tend to enable the artistic work. These findings are consistent with previous studies (e.g. Reynolds & Prior, 2011; White, 2016), that described the use of external supports as a means to sustain older artists' creative practices autonomously.

Regarding the issue of engaging in artistic collaboration, the facts of receiving help from others or delegating certain activities to somebody else are also examples of compensation (Baltes & Carstensen, 1996) and were mentioned by artists and craftspeople in later life. Prior studies showed the relevance of a partner's emotional or practical support in the continuity of artistic practices (e.g. Greathouse, 2014). In this context, gender differences could play a significant role, since in the case of female artists, a partner's support was often ambivalent, and sometimes hindered their artistic development (see, for instance, Chacur-Kiss et al., 2023). Hence, older adults' artistic practices are complex phenomena, which are impacted not only by

individual elements (e.g. age-related changes) but also by relational elements. Social support is a component that was detected in our study that matches with previous findings, particularly those focused on artistic practices carried out in collective spaces (e.g. Joseph & Southcott, 2018; Reynolds, 2018a). Artists and craftspeople explained that they had received help from other artists not only in practical terms, but also through learning from others. This finding is in line with qualitative research that evidenced how female artists in later life found supportive contexts that promote the growth of their craft skills, through positive encouragement and through learning new methods from each other (Reynolds, 2018a). Our findings revealed that participants received support from other artists. This support was related to enhancing artworks, reflecting on artistic practices or using shared studios and it was a relevant part of older artists' daily artistic engagement. Notably, these actions were mostly reported by female artists who were part of our study. Additionally, is important to note that some of these artists lived alone, while others lived with their partners; nevertheless, all of them engaged in artistic activities at a professional level. Therefore, more research is required to examine these influences. The exploration of arts as a way to generate social capital in later life may be an interesting path to explore (e.g. Reynolds, 2018b).

The application of a collective SOC model (Baltes & Carstensen, 1999) can be an avenue for future studies. It is a perspective that could explore the ways in which adaptive processes evolve in couples, families, groups and even societies. This model presupposes that each person within the social system takes on a distinct coping role so that everybody can complement each other. Therefore, adaptation might be conceptualised as a shared task, but the notion of collective SOC is scarcely examined in empirical investigations. Hence, future research could address the idea of adaptation as a shared task, which could be very interesting in the case of artists who are part of shared studios, carry out artistic group activities or live in artistic communities. Research on these matters would make a substantial contribution because people rarely cope with adaptation to significant life change and loss in a social vacuum (Baltes & Carstensen, 1999).

Thirdly, optimisation was used by the artists and craftspeople in our study. Optimisation is related to the application and management of resources at an optimal level, and to their improvement in a way in which skills and domains are maximised (Freund & Baltes, 1998). Older artists' narratives showed that they adapted their work pace in different ways. This confirms previous literature on the topic (e.g., Bal et al., 2019; Lindauer et al., 1997). The participants noted that they handle physical difficulties by alternating weeks of higher and lower amounts of work, reducing daily working hours, taking regular breaks or interspersing artistic and other non-artistic activities, as a way to optimise their resources and preserve a high artistic performance.

Moreover, artists made use of a range of environmental adaptations, including the reduction or enlargement of studio space and the move to a new studio. They chose to remodel their workspaces to maintain their artistic practices. Some of them adapted their studio according to the materials and techniques that they used. Artists' narratives regarding the ways in which they transformed their space confirmed the significant and special relation between the artist and their workspace, and the artists'

interactions with this space (Wainwright, 2010). The majority of those who implemented workspace adaptations engaged in artistic activities at a professional level. In-depth, interdisciplinary studies are required on this topic, for instance, through collaboration between gerontological disciplines, namely psychological, sociological, educational and environmental fields.

The artists and craftspeople in our study modified aspects of their artwork but maintained their artistic goals. Many of the artists appeared to be flexible in terms of the arts or crafts practice performed, changing discipline and adjusting formats to prolong their artistic careers. In some cases, they preferred to choose new artistic objectives, because of the experience of some level of limitation regarding their resources (e.g. health, energy and strength). Additionally, they chose to replace certain practices with new, equally significant ones, in a reorientation mode of adaptation. This showed that growth in new domains is perfectly feasible in later life. These findings are in line with previous insights suggesting that artistic engagement helps older people to develop a sense of purpose and enhance the meaning of life by feeling that they are able to grow in various domains (Matsunobu, 2018). In addition, visual arts may encourage personal growth and a sense of purpose among older adults (Fisher & Specht,1999).The acquisition of novel artistic competences and knowledge in later life, with the start of new artistic practices and abandonment of others, is an interesting finding for two reasons.

Firstly, although the SOC model helps us to better understand the adjustments made by artists to sustain their artistic practices in later life, it may be not very suitable if applied rigidly in an attempt to classify each of the strategies in terms of selection, optimisation or compensation. In fact, our study shows that older visual artists and craftspeople build a complex system of strategies that interact and complement each other. Strategies of selection, optimisation and compensation include individual, relational and environmental elements, which are key to understanding the ways in which artists face changes perceived by them as age-related throughout the life course.

Secondly, our participants' acquisition of new creative skills and knowledge in old age is in line with studies on learning in later life that found that crafts activities could enhance the continuousness of skills and experiences, and offer the potential for lifelong learning and personal challenge (Reynolds, 2018a). It is remarkable that older artists implement a wide range of adaptive and creative strategies, findings that are consistent with those by Lindauer et al. (1997) and Bal et al. (2019). This reveals that change and innovation (often associated with youth) are displayed in artists' later life, and are focused on their present and future as artists. In this sense, the above helps us break down stereotypes such as young equals innovative versus old equals being stuck in your ways, and the notion that creativity is scarcely present in later stages of life. Besides, engaging in artistic practice in later life can influence the attitudes of participants toward their own ageing, especially in cultures where productivity is valued as a precondition for successful adult behaviour (Adams-Price & Morse, 2024).

Artists and craftspeople did mention a variety of self-care practices. Incorporating healthy lifestyles, including eating a balanced diet, and practicing sports were referred to as ways of taking care of themselves. These self-care practices could be perceived as part of a broader neoliberal rhetoric emphasising personal responsibility

for maintaining one's own health, in contrast to other adaptations reported by the participants. However, the fundamental goal of adopting these self-care practices is to sustain the artistic practice for as long as possible. These findings are similar to those of Bal and colleagues (2019), which showed that artists in later life adapt and take care of themselves to maintain their artistic trajectories and preserve their autonomy: in other words, they sought to remain healthy to stay creative. In our study, artists stated that self-care was crucial to maintain the stability of their creative practices. Healthy lifestyles were incorporated not as a mandate from successful ageing paradigms, but from the elements that they perceive as useful to fulfil their inner desire to create art.

Limitations

Despite the interesting findings of our study, some limitations should be considered. Only active artists and craftspeople were included in the sample, and we did not consider older artists who have ended their artistic practice due to age-related changes (or for other reasons). Thus, older artists' experiences of age-related changes that could potentially have put a stop to their artistic practice may have been omitted, as well as potential adaptive strategies that may not have been effective. In addition, although our study was comprehensive in the sense that it included a certain level of diversity in our interviewees (i.e., men and women, professionals and non-professionals, visual artists and craftspeople, artists with long-term artistic trajectories and artists who started their trajectory in later life), greater diversity should be considered in future research. For instance, it would have been very interesting to find out about experiences of artists who have faced major obstacles potentially but not necessarily linked to ageing, such as a neurodegenerative disease. This would contribute to a more integral, comprehensive investigation of the matter and increase our understanding of the range of artists' experiences across the lifespan. Finally, while some distinctions were made in the discussion regarding the use of certain strategies based on expertise levels and specific sociodemographic characteristics, it is believed that these features could influence the selection and implementation of strategies differently. Therefore, future research could enhance the understanding of the topic by focusing on particular groups of artists.

Conclusions

Our study broadens previous research on artistic participation with a lifespan approach, particularly on the topic of age-related changes and adaptations concerning artistic practices in later life. Our study helps to understand, by applying the SOC model, that older visual artists, craftsmen and craftswomen, use a complex system of adaptive strategies that work together and involve different levels, namely individual, social and environmental. From this perspective, we may better understand how artists face changes perceived by them as age-related throughout the life course. Therefore, research based on the collaboration between gerontological disciplines

(e.g. psychological, sociological, educational, environmental and cultural studies) is fundamental to create a solid body of knowledge on the preservation of artistic engagement among older people, which we believe can be one way to 'age well' and may provide an alternative to the paradigm of successful ageing.

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Declarations

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